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Matter of Fact

By Joseph Alsop

The Artful Dodger

THE ARTFUL dodger is at work, now using a member of the Cabinet like a jack-in-the-box, now manipulating this or that department's press releases, and now masterminding another "now-you-see-it-now-you-don't" announcement on one or another major matter.

It is immensely entertaining, as well as pretty baffling, to watch Lyndon B. Johnson in a period like this when the announcement of really difficult decisions cannot be much longer deferred. In such periods, with a normal man in the White House, it is normally possible to gauge the trend of the President's thought.

But with Lyndon Johnson in the White House, the mystifications are so elaborate that one sometimes wonders whether the President knows the trend of his own thought. And while the country waits to learn what Mr. Johnson has really been thinking about the budget, it is worth noting that all this mystification



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generally has a highly practical purpose.

CONSIDER, for example, the splendid, richly comic drama of the 1963 budget. Quite a while before his death, in order to get his tax cut through Congress, President Kennedy had given the powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Rep. Wilbur Mills, a hard and fast commitment to keep the budget under \$100 billion. The necessary work to bring the budget below that figure was already well advanced when President Johnson was sworn in.

Whereupon the most wonderfully dramatic, superbly audible groans and moans began to be heard from the White House. They were the battle sounds of a conservative Hercules, fighting the hundred-headed Hydra of left-wing extravagance. Bulletins were issued from time to time to a breathless Nation, suggesting that the Hydra had Hercules cornered.

The President even telephoned Rep. Mills, to ask whether he would be satisfied with a budget above \$100 billion, only to be told that Mr. Kennedy's commitment must be honored by his successor. Finally, a budget below \$100 billion

was breathlessly unveiled, as an astonishing triumph of hard work and fiscal responsibility—and naturally in a White House all but deprived of electric light, in order to dramatize the President's penny-pinching principles.

The whole performance was the most glorious flim-flam; but it must be noted that the flim-flam got very good results; all but the most astute leaders of the business community had detested President Kennedy, and they would have been totally unconciliated by a Kennedy budget below \$100 billion. But the deliberately staged drama of the 1963 budget persuaded the businessmen that President Johnson was a sound fellow, with his heart in the right place. So it began the immensely helpful Government-business reconciliation.

Early last summer, once again when it became apparent that substantially larger United States forces were needed in Vietnam, there was another very interesting round of public play-acting. In a perfect glare of photographers' lights, with the press of the whole world alerted to look on, the President and his highest advisers endlessly conferred, day after day.

Day after day, the bulletins were issued, suggesting that the Reserves and the National Guard might soon be called up, that a state of war emergency perhaps impended, and so on and on. Then, very softly, the Nation was at last told that the Reserves would not be called up after all; that nothing would happen beyond an increase of our troop strength in Vietnam.

ONE CANNOT prove that the whole thing was elaborately staged from start to finish, as in the case of the 1963 budget. One cannot be quite sure the President did not decide against calling up the reserves at the last minute.

But one can say with complete assurance that it all worked very well for the President. For the step that was taken, which was really a very big step, was made to seem no more than a tiny, modest step by the carefully created expectation of something much bigger still; and there were therefore signs of relief instead of yowls of indignation from the regular opponents of the President's Vietnamese policy.

In short, the results of the flim-flam are regularly quite admirable, and the President's virtuoso performances also deserve profound admiration. (The acumen of those who are taken in so successfully is perhaps a bit less admirable; but that is another subject.)

On the other hand, when one of these performances is in progress, no one can foretell what the planned climax is to be. In the present case, for instance, all of last week's Texas bulletins were about budget-cutting.

But what is the real purpose? To prepare for a budget in which the Great Society has been sacrificed to the needs of the Vietnamese war? Or once again, to persuade the business community that all the appropriate rituals have been observed, and thus to prepare the way for quite another sort of budget, perhaps including a temporary tax increase? Only God and Lyndon Johnson know.